A House Divided

Once you find the road in—it's out of the way--the signs tell the story. The Marais des Cygnes Massacre State Historic Site is not a mess, but both times I was there the place could have used some TLC.

But why make it look clean when rowdy weediness is more appropriate? Five men were murdered here, gang-land style, stood up and then shot. Six lived to tell the tale, Free-Staters, newcomers to Kansas, still a territory in 1858. They were murdered *because* they opposed slavery.

"Bleeding Kansas" bled from open wounds in the 1850s. Violence along the Kansas-Missouri border began the horror of the American Civil War, some historians say.

At the massacre site things are well-marked. Once you know the story, it won't be difficult to keep silence all around. Besides, you're likely alone. There's no gift shop, no t-shirts, just a few picnic tables you don't have call ahead to reserve.

A preacher's wife went looking for her husband and found the slain. The Reverend Charles Reed was one of the six who crawled away into the trees. The Reeds were Baptists from Wisconsin, who'd been in the neighborhood for only a week, long enough to let it be known the Southerners who wanted Kansas open to slavery were an abomination. Wasn't at all afraid to say it either.

That idea didn't go over well with Dr. Charles Hamilton, a Georgian who owned slaves and had recently been run off his Kansas land by abolitionists. Hamilton and a half-dozen other "Border Ruffians" grabbed eleven Free-Staters, marched them into a ravine far back off the beaten path, then shot them, fish in a barrel. It was May 18, 1858.

On June 16, less than a month later, a strapping beardless country boy named Abe Lincoln stood in a hall in Springfield, Illinois, to accept the Illinois Republican Party's nomination for the U. S. Senate. It was 1858, two years before Ft. Sumter.

What could Abe Lincoln have known about the mass murder just south of a place called Trading Post, Kansas? He likely never heard of Dr. Charles Hamilton or the Reverend Charles Reed.

Well, what he couldn't have been blind to was what everyone was seeing thereabouts: slavery was threatening the Union in ways a century-old government did not imagine. You can be sure Lincoln knew Kansas was aflame. He'd seen, I'm sure, the raised fists of Southern statesmen.

Just exactly what the future President planned to say in his acceptance speech that night his good friends had actually tried to talk him out of: the speech was too radical, they told him, too darn pushy. Lincoln would not be moved.

"Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will push it forward, till it shall become lawful in all the States, old as well as new — North as well as South."

That night, the tall, skinny, Kentucky-born candidate didn't pull that speech's most famous phrase out of his hat. He lifted it thoughtfully from any one of the four gospels: "Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation," he said; "and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand."

Today, more than three months after the November election, I can't help thinking Lincoln's insistent use of a single line of scripture has immediate relevance for this very day and this very hour. I do so wish it weren't so.

"A house divided against itself cannot stand."